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Newsman Protest Continued Pakistani Press Curbs

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RAWALPINDI, Pakistan, Feb. 28—Altaf Gauhar, editor in chief of the English-language Karachi newspaper Dawn, was arrested two weeks ago and has been held incommunicado on an unspecified charge of having violated Pakistan's martial law regulation No. 78.

The regulation, promulgated by President Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's predecessor, Gen. Agha Mohammad Yahya Khan, is a vaguely worded rule providing penalties of up to seven years' imprisonment for newsmen who cast discredit on the Government, the President or the armed forces.

Since Mr. Bhutto's accession to the presidency last Dec. 20, he has maintained martial law under a civilian Government. He is currently under heavy criticism by political opponents for continuing martial law.

Formal Censorship Ended

Government officials have noted that the arrested editor was himself the information chief of a previous authoritarian government in which role he contributed significantly to the suppression of a free press in Pakistan.

But in a letter to the Pakistan Government from the International Press Institute disclosed last week, it was argued that Mr. Gauhar's past as a Government official was not a justification for his current detention as a journalist.

Mr. Bhutto ended formal press censorship after assuming office and announced that the

Government would no longer "advise" newspapers of what was fit to print.

But newsmen complain that in effect the advisory system has been resumed and say that the nation's only non-official news agency, Pakistan Press International, is currently under heavy pressure.

Fears were heightened last week when the Government closed a small English-language weekly published in Lahore, The Punjab Punch. The opposition periodical was closed under a 1963 press licensing law.

In a sharply worded letter circulated to the editors of all Pakistani newspapers, Mr. Bhutto's Information Minister, Adul Hafeez Pirzada, outlined Government complaints against newspapers. The letter, published Feb. 14, was widely interpreted as a warning.

Mr. Pirzada cited a series of published items he described as sensational and irrespon-

sible. Among them were photographs of protesting servicemen, editorial demands for recognition of Bangladesh, a German press agency story saying Pakistan was in the grip of labor and student unrest, and an excerpt from Time magazine.

"This sort of coverage would be taboo even in stable societies under normal conditions," he said.

Denies Letter Is Threat

Insisting his letter was not a threat, Mr. Pirzada asserted that press freedom "cannot take precedence over the survival of the nation."

Many Pakistani newsmen from various parts of the country say privately they are under heavy restraint in their reporting and that significant political developments are being consistently barred from publication.

Some newsmen say they fear not only official restraints but also personal reprisals from

militants of Mr. Bhutto's Pakistan People's party, whose unarmed but quasi-military People's Guard is becoming increasingly conspicuous.

"President Bhutto has pledged to end martial law and preserve press freedom, but we have learned that in Pakistan one should never take too sanguine a view of such statements," a newsmen said.

Last week Mr. Gauhar's wife and lawyer appealed to Pakistan's Supreme Court for his release on a writ of habeas corpus. While the judges expressed sympathy, they said that they were powerless in the matter until martial law was lifted.

Meanwhile, President Bhutto faces growing problems each day in trying to govern and hold together a defeated, angry and restless nation. It appears to many that the needs of the future are likely to call for more restraints rather than fewer.